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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century"

Statement submitted by NGO Coordination post Beijing Switzerland, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.

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Statement

Twenty years have passed since the landmark publication of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action at the Fourth World Conference on Women. The time has now come to assess how much progress has been made.

NGO Coordination post Beijing Switzerland asks the Commission on the Status of Women to include the following points in its conclusions:

- The progress made in each Member State should be recognized. The follow-up to the Beijing Platform for Action must build on this progress.
- No country has yet achieved full equality. The Beijing Platform for Action should be fully implemented in every State, regardless of the State's level of development. The human rights of every person, no matter what their gender, should be recognized, and all forms of discrimination should be eliminated.
- By implementing the Beijing Platform for Action, societies will have to adapt by using measures such as gender mainstreaming – assessing all actions from a gender perspective – in order to challenge stereotypes linked to local traditions. Gender mainstreaming also helps to achieve the specific goal of overcoming inequalities between men and women in the forthcoming post-2015 sustainable development programme, which is due to be adopted at the United Nations General Assembly session in September 2015.
- States must invest the human and financial resources needed to implement the Beijing Platform for Action. If they do rely on civil society bodies to carry out certain tasks or to help them set up the institutional mechanisms needed to promote women, they must ensure that such bodies remain structurally and financially secure. The system of project- or service-related subsidy does not enable civil society bodies to work independently, which is essential for critical and efficient collaboration.

It is now time to go beyond the debate about development or human rights. It is time to stop quibbling about the text of the Beijing Platform for Action, and to stop revisiting particular paragraphs to contest already approved wording. It is now time to implement the Platform for Action without delay, and to take any measures needed to achieve true equality between men and women.

Women have recently suffered a number of serious setbacks. The shocking statements issued by armed groups in Iraq, Syria and Nigeria are only the visible part of a far more insidious groundswell affecting even the most open and progressive societies.

The time has come to act and to reaffirm the relevance of the Platform for Action in 2015. We make these requests on the basis of our experiences in Switzerland. Our country may seem like a paradise, but women's rights and circumstances do not depend solely on the level of development of the country in which they live.

Admittedly, effective equality has been achieved in training and education. For several years now, more women have graduated from university than men, for example. The average standard of living for women in Switzerland is higher than that for women in other countries. Women in our country are guaranteed access to

basic care. And our national and cantonal governments have taken numerous steps to promote and achieve gender equality.

Nevertheless, inequalities remain in all of the critical areas of concern of the Platform for Action. The Swiss Government itself recognized this fact in its report to UN Women in preparation for this session of the Commission on the Status of Women.

These inequalities are largely linked to stereotypes that are deeply embedded in our collective references, of which we are often not aware. Too often they are encouraged by the media, both through traditional media and through new media, such as social networks. Attempts to promote female role models and capable figures of authority must compete with the hypersexualization of women and girls. Swiss women members of parliament are once again complaining of inappropriate comments made by some of their male colleagues to the total indifference of the other members of parliament. Meanwhile, gender violence is difficult to identify in a culture that believes it has overcome all inequalities between men and women. Stereotypes also affect women's choices regarding profession, level of occupation, involvement in unpaid care work (in families or communities) and access to a salary equivalent to that earned by men (regardless of the fact that this has been expressly provided for in the Swiss Constitution since 1981 and in a federal law since 1996).

These inequalities are also linked, however, to the fact that equality in law does not necessarily mean equality in fact. Women are protected by a whole series of legislative instruments. Nonetheless, these laws are not always put into practice. This can be seen, for example, in cases of domestic violence, where some proceedings are abandoned despite the obligation on the part of the authorities to prosecute ex officio, or in the trafficking in and exploitation of human beings, where victims are sometimes only identified if the official responsible for the case is feeling charitable. It is also manifested, highly significantly, in the area of pay equality, where there are not enough points of comparison to enable women to initiate legal proceedings, and where the Swiss State does not have enough resources to conduct systematic economic research. The Federal Office for Gender Equality is only able to examine a few such cases per year, and only those concerning companies that sell services to the Swiss Confederation. Nevertheless, in October 2014, the Federal Council decided to take new measures to guarantee pay equality across Switzerland.

Women continue to suffer discrimination, which prevents them from reaching decision-making posts in both the public and private sectors. Companies that are found wanting in this regard often argue that women do not do enough to demonstrate their abilities and their desire to take up such posts, and that women are not easily persuaded. These arguments clearly reveal the extent to which women are expected to act like men in order to reach positions of responsibility, and that not enough attention is given to the fact that women are women and have a different way of analyzing situations, responding to requests and dealing with authority. This once again relates to the issue of stereotypes and defined gender roles. Similarly, if a man wishes to pursue a career in a female-dominated profession, his masculinity is called into question.

Assessing public activities from a gender perspective – gender mainstreaming – is promoted by Switzerland in its external policies but is still not being applied in Switzerland itself, except in a handful of towns and one federal department. This important structural advance arising from Beijing has not yet been successfully

applied at the level of national or cantonal government in Switzerland. Cantons and towns established equality offices and departments in response to the Swiss national action plan. However, following a number of budgetary cuts, these offices and departments were merged with other offices, or even shut down. The Federal Tribunal, however, recalled that these entities were part of a commitment to apply the constitutional provision on gender equality, and that that sometimes required institutional and organizational measures to be put in place.

Following the introduction of some institutional mechanisms many politicians and administrative bodies have high expectations of civil society. Swiss society has a large number of associations, and the bodies defending women's rights are often associations that receive little financial backing. Owing to the fact that women on average do not possess the same financial means as men, they cannot provide a great deal of financial support for the work of the associations to which they belong, as a consequence of which such associations tend to suffer from a lack of funding. Associations therefore need basic funding to enable them to meet the expectations of their members and of the Confederation.